

Discussion

The Global Youth Tobacco Survey in Oman is a first national school-based survey, which was conducted among students in grades 8–10. Many studies were conducted to measure the prevalence of smoking among school children but the GYTS is considered the first study in Oman concerning issues about other tobacco products, school curriculum and the effect of media. As it used the same standardized core questionnaire and protocol as many neighboring countries like Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates and the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, it enables us for the first time to make cross country comparison in prevalence and other related issue concerning tobacco use.

The Oman GYTS shows a high prevalence of tobacco use among school students. Nearly one-fifth of students currently use any tobacco products with 9.1% currently smoke cigarettes and 12.8% currently use other tobacco products such as water-pipes (Shishah) and smokeless chewing tobacco. These prevalence rates are similar to those published in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Kuwait.

As expected boys were significantly higher than girls to have ever tried smoking cigarettes. However, as shown by the recent media campaigns, the tobacco companies make relentless efforts to conquer this segment of the youth of the Omani society.

The survey data showed the fact that, for this segment of the population, water-pipe (Shisha) consumption is as much prevalent as cigarettes.. This was to be expected as recently municipal rules to grant permission to Shishah cafes were relaxed and consequently such cafes flourished rapidly not only in the capital Muscat but also to other regions where in the past tough regulation were enforced. Surprisingly enough is the fact that girls who currently use other tobacco product were four times higher than those who smoke cigarettes illustrating the need to encompass all types of tobacco use when developing intervention strategies.

Over 14% of all students indicated that they were likely to initiate smoking during the next year with significant difference, twice as high for boys compared to girls. This figure is alarming and need more efforts to establish intervention programs to protect them. It is not clear as to why these students felt particularly vulnerable to tobacco use.

Most international studies show a strong desire by adult smoker to quit the habit. This appears to be the case also for young people the vast majority of whom were current smokers (77.7%) stated that they currently desire to stop smoking. However, seven in ten students tried to stop smoking during the past year but failed.

During the past two decades, research conducted world wide showed that tobacco consumption in any form and exposure to environmental tobacco

smoke can cause numerous diseases and disability. The GYTS in Oman showed that the exposure of young people to environmental tobacco smoke for places both inside and outside of the home is high with exposure being three times more in current smokers than the never smokers.

However the data revealed a positive students' attitude that must be appreciated. Approximately nine in ten students think that smoking should be banned in public places. Currently there are no comprehensive national legislations to protect the general public from exposure to tobacco smoke. Accordingly administrators of the public facilities can choose when, where and if they there is a need to ban smoking in public places like restaurants and cafes or recreation facilities and children play areas. Unfortunately, often is the case that they opt not to.

Health education programs should be strengthened to alert the current smokers about the harmful effect of smoking on themselves and others. However without strong legislations in place it is unlikely that such efforts can lead to change in individual behavior.

An important implication of the data is exemplified by the fact that more current smokers have "positive attitude" regarding smoking than never smokers. Approximately half of the current smokers compared to one third of never smokers think that boys who smoke have more friends and smoking makes them more attractive. On the contrary, both never and current smokers are less likely to think that girls who smoke have more friends and more attractive.

Over one third of current smokers and more than half of non-smokers definitely think that smoke from others is harmful to them with no significant difference between boys and girls. Nearly four in ten of current users of Shishah (43.6%) and one third of never users of Shishah think that Shishah is less harmful than cigarettes with no significant difference between boys and girls. This leads to a conclusion that there is misunderstanding and ignorance of the consequent hazards of smoking especially Shishah. The problem is compounded by the lack of research on Shishah and its wider acceptability and popularity in the eastern societies.

Less than half of all students were taught in schools during the past year about the dangers of smoking and one third of students had discussed during the past year reasons why people their age smoke. There was no significant difference by gender. Messages on health hazards of tobacco are being given to students at higher levels (grade 11 and beyond). As the survey data indicated that smoking is imitated at early ages, tobacco control education including school curriculum and health education needs to start at a very young age. While the survey could provide an indication of whether tobacco

control was taught in the school, it cannot comment on the content or intensity of the curriculum given.

Educational program can serve a useful role in tobacco control. However, unless they are backed up by strong public health policies, which help young people, refrain from using tobacco, educational programs have only modest results.

As yet there is no comprehensive ban on tobacco advertisement in Oman, the GYTS provides very strong evidence that a total ban on tobacco advertisement is needed. Three in four students saw anti-smoking media messages in the past 30 days. Six in ten of never smokers and eight in ten current smokers saw pro-tobacco messages in newspapers and magazines during the past 30 days. One in ten of both never smokers and current smokers had an object with a cigarette brand logo on and one in ten of both never smokers and current smokers were offered free cigarettes by tobacco company representative. This could be explained by either the total lack of regulation from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry and/or that the tobacco companies pay no attention to what ever restriction imposed by the this Ministry and highlights the need for a complete ban on any tobacco promotion as part of a comprehensive ban of advertising.

One in ten of current smokers usually smoke at home. Six times as many female current smokers smoke at home compared to male current smokers (53.2% & 8.4% respectively). These data reveal that there is absence of parental guidance on objection to smoking, which is an important factor to prevent young people from smoking.

Despite a national law banning tobacco sales to minors and single stick sales, still nearly half of youth buy their cigarettes from stores and nine in ten of current smokers stated that they had an access to get cigarettes easily which encourage them to continue smoking.

Conclusion and recommendations

The Oman GYTS 2003, has shown high prevalence of ever smoking among students in age of 13–15. There is an alarming growth in the number of young people who use other types of tobacco especially Shishah and chewing tobacco.

The study highlights the need for an urgent action to curb this epidemic, through a comprehensive national tobacco control legislation and other components like persistent educational messages. Recent, the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) Health Ministers have acted firmly on issues such as tobacco taxation, a move which lead to increase in tobacco prices by almost 50%. Another move was seen by individual states such as the state of Qatar which successfully became the first country to issue a comprehensive